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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2017
TAGS: PREL PTER KPAL EG IS
SUBJECT: DAS DANIN/DASD KIMMITT DISCUSS BORDER SECURITY
WITH DEFENSE MINISTER TANTAWI

Classified By: Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone for reasons
1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (S) NEA DAS Robert Danin and DASD Mark Kimmitt discussed enhancing both Egypt's counter smuggling efforts and Egyptian-Israeli border security cooperation with Minister of Defense Field Marshal Tantawi on November 8. Tantawi said he would be open to trilateral discussions on border security with the U.S. and Israel, but not at a "high-level" or with MFO. Tantawi also repeated his long-standing request that Israel agree to permit Egypt to dedicate another "regiment" of Border Guard Forces (BGF) to securing the Egypt-Gaza border, said he looks forward to the visit of U.S. technical tunnel detection experts, and said procuring border security equipment will be a priority. Tantawi pressed for temporary openings of the Rafah border crossing to allow Palestinians to exit for humanitarian reasons and warned that the Palestinians may react against Egypt if pressure in Gaza is not relieved. "The only way to stop them from entering would be to shoot them, and we cannot shoot them." Reacting emotionally to the U.S. presentation of the Rafah-Gaza smuggling issue, Tantawi also cautioned that "not all aspects of U.S.-Egyptian relations should be channeled through Israel." End summary.

Enhancing Egyptian-Israeli communication

¶12. (S) NEA DAS Robert Danin and DASD Mark Kimmitt discussed ways to improve Egypt-Gaza border security with Minister of Defense Tantawi on November 8. Assistant Minister for Policy MG Al Assar, Assistant Minister for Armament MG Fouad Abdel Halim, and Director of Military Intelligence MG Murad Mowafy joined Tantawi for the meeting. The Ambassador and OMC Chief also participated. Danin noted that the issue of smuggling under the Gaza-Egypt border was having an adverse effect on Egyptian-U.S. relations, and Egyptian-Israeli relations. Danin told Tantawi that the Israelis were worried about smuggling and apparent GOE facilitation of Iranian-trained Hamas supporters back into Gaza, and urged Egypt to be more vigilant. Danin said, and Kimmitt emphasized, that he told Israeli officials that the paper they distributed in Washington on Egypt's counter-smuggling effort was not helpful and said the Israelis admitted they had erred in doing so. Danin said he had the sense that the Israelis were embarrassed about the paper and believed they needed to "quiet down." If the Israelis have concerns, Tantawi said, they can discuss them with us at any time.

¶3. (S) Danin asked Tantawi if he would find it useful to discuss border security and related issues with the Israelis and the U.S. together. Tantawi said such discussions could be useful but stressed that they should not be on a "high level" or through MFO. (Note: MG Al Assar, MG Fouad, and MG Murad Mowafy subsequently told Danin and Kimmitt that trilateral discussions could expand on the existing military intelligence Egyptian-Israeli liaison channel (through Egypt's Liaison Agency with International Organizations (LAWIO)), but agreed to consider alternate proposals. They offered to host Israeli officials in Cairo for the discussions. End note.)

Enhancing counter-smuggling efforts

¶4. (S) BGF: Danin urged Tantawi to increase the strength of the BGF, as permitted under the 2005 Egyptian-Israeli agreement governing the BGF deployment. Tantawi said "let us have another regiment." When Danin explained that Israeli officials believe the Knesset would not agree to amend the 2005 agreement, Tantawi responded that Olmert had told him personally two months earlier that he would seek permission for an additional regiment but did not follow through. Kimmitt asked Tantawi to consider a temporary deployment of additional troops, which would be staged at the edge of Zone B and moved into and out of Zone C on a daily basis. This step could demonstrate the impact of more troops on smuggling, Kimmitt said. Tantawi said "we will see." (Note: MG Al Assar later expressed some frustration over the proposal for a temporary deployment of BGF. On November 13, MG Al Assar told emboff that Egypt seeks Israeli consent to dedicate a second regiment to securing the border with Gaza and will not consider alternate formulas for increasing the number of BGF on duty. End note).

¶5. (S) Equipment: Tantawi said Egypt had asked the Israelis "last week" for catalogs of tunnel detection equipment, noting that he had made procuring border security equipment a priority. Tantawi also welcomed the upcoming visit of U.S. tunnel detection experts (Note: A USACE-led team of tunnel detection and exploitation experts is scheduled to visit Egypt's border with Gaza on November 15. End note). MG Fouad explained that under a five-year procurement plan beginning in FY08, Egypt had committed to investing USD 165 million in border security equipment, such as motorcycles with electro-optical devices, seismic detection equipment, helicopters with night vision devices, and patrol boats. MG Fouad promised to pass MoD's prioritized list of intended border security equipment purchases to Danin and Kimmitt.

¶6. (S) Other measures: When Danin asked if the Egyptians would consider participating in a Near East South Asia (NESAS) Center-sponsored seminar on border security, Al Assar said MoD would only consider this proposal if Egypt is the sole participant.

¶7. (S) Kimmitt noted that Egyptian-Israeli intelligence exchanges with Egypt's military intelligence were good, but that there was no exchange with Ministry of Interior (MOI). Kimmitt also asked whether Egypt pursues all intel tips the Israelis provide. MG Mowafy said he speaks frequently via a hotline to his Israeli counterpart, and shares all information on smugglers. Mowafy did not comment on whether Egyptian-Israeli Ministry of Interior liaison exists. (Note: LAWIO Chief MG Nagy Kamal told Danin and Kimmitt on November 7 during a tour of the "Philadelphia Strip" that there is currently no effective MOI liaison channel. End note). Kimmitt stressed that the coming month (before Congress acts on a proposal to condition a portion of FMF) is the critical opportunity to take all possible measures to combat smuggling. He suggested that MoD consider alternate ideas such as the use of "tunnel rats" and tear gas to increase effectiveness. Arresting key smugglers would also demonstrate Egypt's political commitment to addressing this problem, Kimmitt said.

¶ 18. (S) MG Mowafy said Egypt is worried that the "3,000" Palestinians in Gaza who want to enter Egypt will try to cross the border forcibly and that the BGF will not be able to stop them. Tantawi said Egypt had asked the Israelis to let Palestinians transit to enter Egypt (to attend school, receive medical care or go on Hajj) and suggested opening Rafah for limited periods of time with EU BAM monitors facilitating on the Palestinian side. Danin said that both PA and Israeli officials prefer to keep Rafah closed, but emphasized that efforts continue to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Calling the Palestinian position on opening Rafah "very strange," Tantawi said Egypt could manage the opening and that without relieving pressure, there may be an explosive reaction against Egypt, not Israel. Tantawi said: "What if I find 10,000 Palestinians on the border, including children and the sick in wheelchairs? Will I order my forces to kill them? Terrorists may cross with the ordinary people, so I must order the BGF to shoot. That is the only way to stop them if they break through. But I cannot do this." Without a Palestinian Authority partner on the Gaza side, opening the border would be difficult, Danin responded, and suggested exploring other mechanisms. Tantawi pressed again (repeatedly) for a temporary opening at Rafah.

U.S.-Egyptian Relations

¶ 19. (S) Danin told Tantawi that the U.S. values its strategic relationship with Egypt and sees the peace between Egypt and Israel as fundamental. He told Tantawi that Egypt has many friends in Congress, but that there is a feeling in Washington that Egypt could do more to combat smuggling. Tantawi said the American people are among the nicest in the world, but expressed frustration that some in Congress saw the Egyptian-Israeli relationship as the cornerstone of U.S.-Egyptian relations. Tantawi cautioned that not all aspects of U.S.-Egyptian relations should be channeled through Israel. "This is unfair," Tantawi asserted; "not everything (Israel) says is true. When the Israelis talk to us, they say we are doing a good job." Danin noted that this disconnect may be all the more reason for enhanced coordination mechanisms.

¶ 10. (U) DAS Danin and DASD Kimmitt cleared this cable.
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